

VZCZCXRO3613

PP RUEHBC RUEHKUK RUEHROV  
DE RUEHLB #0541/01 1121520

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

P 211520Z APR 08

FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1587  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RHMFSS/COMSOCCENT MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 2427

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000541

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO  
STATE FOR NEA/ELA  
DEPT PASS TO EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/17/2018

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM PINR IS LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: BERRI, OTHER POLITICIANS STUCK IN PAST  
SAYS GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHBISHOP

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶11. (C) According to Greek Orthodox Archbishop Elias Audi, the current political stalemate will be difficult to resolve because the roots of the discourse go back to the 1975-1990 civil war and can not easily be forgotten. He put the blame on the "politicians" thinking of their fiefdoms first, rather than trying to resolve their differences. Audi singled out Speaker Nabih Berri as one of the main culprits for refusing to open parliament. Audi also said he will continue to criticize Hizballah as long as Hizballah promotes an Islamic Shia image over a Lebanese national one. Audi gave his frank appraisal that Lebanese perceive U.S. foreign policy to be strongly tilted towards Israel.

¶12. (C) In Audi's Palm Sunday sermon on April 20, he continued his harsh criticism of Lebanese politicians and aimed at the Hizballah-led opposition for putting their own interests first. He also was critical about Lebanese who remain "silent" and accept the current political situation. End summary.

ROOTS OF CIVIL WAR SEEN IN CURRENT STALEMATE

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¶13. (C) The Charge, accompanied by Poloff, met with Archbishop Elias Audi, Metropolitan for the Orthodox Archdiocese of Beirut, on April 17. Audi explained that he sees the current stalemate between the different political factions as having its roots in the 1975-1990 civil war. Audi said that while the war ended in 1990, there remains in the minds of the Lebanese public "bad memories of violence and blood that cannot be erased." During the civil war, fighting did not just cut across sectarian lines, but also along family lines. This culture of violence desensitized Lebanese to the human condition. The civil war also resulted in a large number of deaths, which created a "lost generation" within Lebanese society. Audi lamented that the end result today is a bunch of politicians who are fighting to avenge yesterday's battles and who do not care about the living conditions or suffering of the average Lebanese person in the street.

¶14. (C) The Charge inquired whether recent public events, such as the April 13 march in Beirut to commemorate the anniversary of the beginning of the civil war and the recent American University of Beirut poster exhibit in remembrance

of those are missing or killed in the civil war, were signs of reconciliation in Lebanon. Audi replied that while these are hopeful signs of reconciliation among the Lebanese people, this message does not reach the "powers at hand." He added, many Lebanese recognize this political reality and are starting to ignore politics altogether.

"POLITICAL DOCTORS" RESPONSIBLE  
FOR MALPRACTICE

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¶ 15. (C) Audi highlighted concerns about the callousness of politicians who refuse to resolve their differences and come together to find a solution to end the stalemate. He said these "political doctors" who claim to be serving the public good are not even practicing their trade. Audi singled out Shia Speaker Nabih Berri when emphasizing this point. How can Berri consider himself as Speaker, when he refuses to open parliament and continues "to pretend" that he bears no responsibility for current state of affairs? Audi said Berri is suffering from "crooked logic" by setting the premise that simply promoting a internal national dialogue with "certain parties" would make them act in the best interest of the country and end the current crisis. Audi said that Berri has the forum needed for a national dialogue: "open the parliament."

¶ 16. (C) Audi mused about a past attempt at arranging a national dialogue involving MP Michel Aoun, Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah, and MP Saad Hariri. According to Audi, this dialogue lasted two days and then Hizballah "left the table" and instructed its militants to attack Israeli soldiers along the southern Blue Line, which resulted in Hizballah's 34-day war with Israel in 2006. Audi commented

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that Nasrallah and Hizballah obviously did not feel obligated to tell anyone at the dialogue table of their military plans during the so-called National Dialogue. Hizballah must see itself as "Lebanese first," before any such national dialogue would work, Audi stated.

HIZBALLAH NEED TO SEE THEMSELVES  
AS LEBANESE FIRST

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¶ 17. (C) Audi said he heard some in the Shia community think he "hates" them because of his recent public criticism of Hizballah's political agenda. He explained that his critical comments about Hizballah are based on Hizballah's priority to promote its Shia identity, rather than a nationalist Lebanese one. Audi pointed out that for many years when Hizballah held rallies or parades, only the yellow flag of Hizballah was present, never Lebanon's national flag. It is only recently that the Lebanese flag has appeared in Hizballah public events.

¶ 18. (C) Audi also conveyed his concern about the apparent growing Iranian influence over Hizballah. Iran is trying to mold Hizballah into a Islamic Shia movement, he said. Audi understands how Hizballah might see Iran as the religious equivalent to the Vatican, but he stressed until Hizballah finally comes to terms that being Lebanese should be its top priority, he will continue to be openly critical of Hizballah's political positions.

GREEK ORTHODOX LEBANESE CONTINUE TO  
EMIGRATE FROM LEBANON

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¶ 19. (C) According to Audi, over 100,000 Greek Orthodox Lebanese have permanently emigrated from Lebanon since the end of the civil war in 1990. They have decided to give up completely and live in Canada, the United States, Greece, and Australia, where the prospects of living a "normal life" are better. In his opinion, emigration among young Greek

Orthodox is increasing from Lebanon and much of this can be attributed to a lack of political change and poor economic opportunities. Audi commented that it is hard for him to accept when he sees the youth leave Lebanon and knowing they probably will not ever return.

LEBANESE PERCEPTION OF U.S. POLICY  
DRIVEN BY ISRAEL

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¶10. (C) Audi gave his frank appraisal on how the average Lebanese sees U.S. foreign policy towards Lebanon and the region. In his opinion, no matter how much U.S. assistance is sent or how many statements of public support are given, most Lebanese see U.S. government policy driven predominately by Israel and its security concerns. According to Audi, this Lebanese perception of U.S. policy is driven by apparent by U.S. unwillingness to confront Israel for its conduct in the region. Audi made it clear that he did not support or subscribe to this perception.

ARCHBISHOP'S SERMON HAS HARSH WORDS FOR "POLITICIANS"

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¶11. (C) Archbishop Audi reiterated his criticisms of the Hizballah-led opposition, without specifically naming it, for the current political deadlock during his (Orthodox) Palm Sunday sermon given at the Greek Orthodox Cathedral of Saint George in Beirut on April 20. Audi said, "we see officials putting their own interests above any other interest" and these politicians are not dealing with the real problems facing "the poor, the needy, and the business owners." Audi also was critical of Lebanese who "stay silent" over the current situation and who through their non-action are contributing to the political stalemate. "Our problem in this country is that we know those before us are not saying the truth, but we convince ourselves that we should believe them," Audi added.

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